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SUBJECT: The Long March: The Fourth Wall, Meizhou's Opening
to the World

REF: A) Guangzhou 13384, B) Guangzhou 13385

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11. (SBU) Summary: As part of the Long March, a series of
road journeys through the Guangzhou consular district
(reftels), we traveled to Meizhou, the traditional capital
of the Hakka, a subset of China's majority Han ethnic
group. The Hakka, or "guest people," currently find
themselves faced with striking a balance between a critical
need to lure more investment and tourism, and their
centuries-old struggle to protect and retain their cultural
identity. End Summary

The View from Backstage

12. (U) The Hakka began migrating to this remote,
mountainous region some 1700 years ago, often fleeing
invasion, and rarely receiving a warm welcome. That
history has shaped the way they view - and engage - the
world. This is seen clearly in the roundhouse, the
region's dominant architecture. In many centers of Hakka
culture, these multi-story structures are built much like
Roman arenas, forming a complete circle and shutting out
the world. In Meizhou, however, roundhouses tend to
encircle just three-quarters of an open central courtyard;
a large pond occupies the fourth side. Much like theatres,
which they resemble in many ways, these attractive
structures with their open "fourth walls" serve
simultaneously to protect inhabitants from the world
outside, and to invite it in. This tradition informs
Meizhou's leaders today, as they seek to encourage
development and investment while at the same time
protecting what they consider their most valuable asset:
their unique culture. In meetings with the Congenoffs,
Meizhou's leaders laid out their plans for doing just that.

Setting the Scene: Meizhou Today

13. (U) Liao Haojiang, Deputy Director of the Meizhou
Development and Reform Bureau, is quick to admit that "The
World Capital of Hakka People" - as city fathers like to
call Meizhou - is one of the less developed prefectures in

Guangdong Province. This is due in part to its terrain: 80% mountains, 10% river, just 10% flatlands, and overall 71% forested. Meizhou's population of 4.98 million is evenly split between urban and rural dwellers; some 870,000 natives have left the prefecture.

¶4. (U) Meizhou's GDP grew on average 9.9% annually over the last five years, to RMB 31.4 billion (USD 3.9 billion), a per capita GDP of RMB 7940 (USD 990). During that period, the prefecture received foreign direct investment of USD 77 million, primarily from Hong Kong and Southeast Asia. In such a sprawling, mountainous region, a good road network is critical to development; Meizhou's currently ranks best among Guangdong's mountain prefectures, with two highways, two more under construction, and some 11,354 km of roads.

¶5. (U) In education, the prefecture has had more success producing scholars than keeping them. Some 22 leading Chinese academics come from Meizhou. The junior high schools achieve 80% attendance, the high schools 60%; the local university hosts 12,000 students and offers undergraduate education.

Raising the Curtain: the 11th Five-year Plan

¶6. (SBU) The dynamic balance between the Hakka people's dual reflexes of self-protection and engagement can be seen in the theme chosen for their 11th Five-year Plan: "Environmentally-Conscious Industrialization, Driven by Culture, and Oriented Toward Openness." Safe within the encircling walls of their homogenous culture, they invite the world to join them.

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¶7. (U) Their goals are ambitious, but not unreasonably so: average growth of 10%; a GDP (by 2010) of RMB 55 billion (USD 6.9 billion); per capita GDP (by 2010) of RMB 13,000 (USD 1620); and a shift in agriculture from traditional (subsistence) crops to commoditization (cash crops). Over the last five years, GDP broke down as: 25% agriculture, 42% industry, and 33% service sector. The goal for the next five: 15% agriculture, 48% industry, and 37% service sector, highlighting a larger portion of the GDP devoted to industry and service sector growth. The service sector is currently strongest in hotels and tourism-related services; the relatively modest increases are meant to come from production-oriented services such as logistics, accounting and auditing.

¶8. (U) Four traditional industries are targeted for further development: tobacco, power generation, building materials and copper refining. Two new ones - IT/electronics and biopharmaceuticals - will also receive special attention. Liao feels the prefectures industries are currently too resource driven, and need to move toward more tech-driven activities; the goal is a 3% yearly decrease in energy consumption per unit of GDP, a goal in line with the central government's push to improve energy-efficient production.

Improving Society and Culture

¶9. (U) Meizhou's leaders say efforts will be made prefecture-wide to improve education, in an effort to offset a brain-drain that has seen talented Meizhou natives leaving for neighboring - and more rapidly developing - Guangzhou and Shenzhen. Along with attempts to lure them back, 100% attendance in both high school and junior high school will be pursued through improvements in technology. Liao says the environment will not be sacrificed in the name of development, though this is not currently a concern given Meizhou's relatively under-developed state. The Meizhou city metropolitan area has a 50,000-ton wastewater

treatment capacity, trash-fueled power plants, and the ability to handle one ton of medical waste daily. The eight counties surrounding the capital are currently building treatment plants. Revenues generated by increased development will be used to improve social services across the board, with a particular emphasis on poor farmers. These will come in for improvements in roads, social and health services, and safe drinking water.

But Will it Play Out of Town?

Meizhou's Vision of the New Socialist Countryside

¶10. (SBU) According to Wei Fangyuan, Deputy Director of the Meizhou Agriculture Bureau, the New Socialist Countryside will be better than the old in five fundamental ways: Production, Quality of Life, Village Environment, Civic Attitudes/Atmosphere, and Democratic Management. In a significant break from previously stated national goals, Meizhou leaders now acknowledge that some 80% of the population will continue to live in rural areas for the foreseeable future; the government had articulated a national goal of drawing 60% of the population into urban areas. (Note: this contrasts with the recent announcement by the Guangdong Communist Party Committee and the Guangdong Government in its recently released planning document, "Decisions on Accelerating the Construction of Socialist New Countryside," which said that in the next five years, Guangdong Province would urbanize 4.76 million of its rural population. End note.)

¶11. (U) With this new perspective, the focus has shifted to raising rural production and farmer incomes. This will be pursued in four ways: through using technology and hybrids to raise grain output; encouraging surplus labor to leave rural areas; transitioning from traditional to cash crops; and building cooperatives to help farmers market their produce. In addition, efforts will be made to ensure farmer's products meet industry standards. Much of this

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will be run through Meizhou's agricultural technology university, founded in 1933 and well-respected in China. Its graduates serve in government throughout the country.

¶12. (SBU) Many of these initiatives were on display when Conoff was shown the model village of Shukeng, in Chendong Township. Located just outside the Meizhou city limits, the village's 2,000 residents enjoy a per capita yearly GDP of RMB 5,200 (USD 650). Shukeng boasts more than 30 km of roads, including a brand new one branching off the main road to Meizhou and running through the center of town. Meizhou Foreign Affairs Office Deputy Director Du Maojiang readily admitted the village was chosen for viewing because it is doing the best of all the prefecture's model villages. According to Shukeng's elected leader, a Mr. Jiang, the village's two main sources of income are fruit, and money sent home from youth working in Meizhou city. All residents 18 years and older vote in local elections which are held every three years.

¶13. (U) A concrete example of the village's modernization efforts came in the form of a waste recycling system installed in a local home. The crude but apparently effective system gathered human and swine waste in covered cisterns in a courtyard just outside the kitchen windows. A plastic tube running from the cisterns into the house carried methane used to power the gas stove, as well as some lighting. The entire system cost RMB 1500 (USD 187), with RMB 800 (USD 100) of the total paid by a government grant. The system is meant to provide multiple benefits: improved health through effective disposal of waste; economic savings from eliminating the need to purchase cooking and lighting fuel; and environmental protection through recycling.

¶14. (SBU) The presentation by the Deputy Director of the Meizhou Tourism Bureau, Yang Guihong, was the least persuasive of all those provided by prefecture officials. Reading from a script, he spoke - not without justification - of the attractiveness of both Hakka culture and the Meizhou landscape. Tourism officials hope to use both to lure visitors from the Pearl River Delta area, Hong Kong, Macao and Southeast Asia, but have no clear plans for doing so. Promotional materials are rudimentary; a few coffee table books filled with glossy photos, but no maps or other information that might be useful for trip planning.

¶15. (U) Without such information, it would not be easy for the prospective tourist to reach Meizhou. The city's small airport only provides regular flights to two destinations: Guangzhou and Hong Kong. Flights to Guangzhou are routinely cancelled 24 hours prior to departure when bookings do not reach a pre-set minimum; unwary travelers can find themselves stranded in Meizhou for days waiting for enough passengers to accumulate. At one time flights to Shenzhen, Xiamen and Zhuhai were also offered, but these were cancelled due to lack of interest.

Comment

¶16. (SBU) The Mandarin Chinese name for the Hakka - "Kejia" - literally means "guest people." Now these perpetual guests face the challenge of playing host, to investors and tourists, both foreign and domestic.

¶17. (SBU) While this will require the development of some new reflexes, deep veins of entrepreneurship and hospitality running through the Hakka culture will serve well when engaging the world. The commitment to welcoming and supporting investment is clear, but still in its formative stages. Commitment to protecting the environment is discussed, but not yet proven. Commitment to promoting tourism is nowhere in evidence, though it begins to appear in Yongding, Fujian Province, the next stop on the long march.

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¶18. (SBU) In the end, reviews of the new show now on offer in Meizhou would likely be mixed; in theatrical terms, a critic might call it a show with legs, but not yet a hit.

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